Nietzsche, nihilism, and the orientation of the "near" in new materialist thought

This paper draws connections between Nietzsche's diagnosis of nihilism, his philosophy of the "nearest things" and issues of orientation in contemporary thought. The trajectory which Nietzsche traces from "the devaluation of the highest values" to the task of transvaluation, supplies an overarching context for addressing nihilism as a crisis of orientation. It is argued that Nietzsche's turn towards the "closest" things as a new direction for thought shares priorities named as the "keywords" of our time: "embodiment, affect, the quotidian, singularity, contingency, intimacy, precarity" (Laura Marcus, 2016). In order to pursue the deeper implications of this affinity, some recent engagement with Nietzsche in new materialist writings are considered. It is claimed that Nietzsche's ideas about the nearest things provide these theories with resources to contest nihilism at the level of value, without reinstating an uncritical appeal to the authority of "lived experience."

Keywords: Nietzsche, nihilism, transvaluation, nearest things, new materialism

Amongst the thinkers who have diagnosed the lamentable state of the modern world, Nietzsche stands apart as the most extraordinary. How is it, we might ask, that a thinker so alert to the intractability of nihilism should be fired with such visionary fervour? Nothing seems less likely amidst the defeated spirits and depleted energies of our world-weary age. Ours is not a time when madmen run into marketplaces and philosophers declare themselves dynamite. Here is where it wants to end, we say. It is too late for new dawns. The systematic "distraction of thought" by means of which modern cultures "cease to *be aware* of life" has reached its optimum (SE, 4).[i] In the age of information technology, precarious employment and escalating time poverty, the problem of life's abiding vacancy never emerges. For the human of today, too exhausted to clamour for its chains, even the model of the last man seems an aspirational extravagance. In these deeply nihilistic times, how does philosophical thought orientate itself?

When Nietzsche declared in 1888 that he was a "destiny" he named his discovery of the life-negating *animus* of Christian morality as an event without parallel, a real

catastrophe: “Anyone who raises awareness about it is a *force majeure*, a destiny – he breaks the history of humanity in two. You live *before* him or you live *after* him .. The lightening-bolt of truth has struck precisely what stood highest hitherto” (*EH*, “Destiny,” 8). These lines, like so many from Nietzsche’s corpus, are oft-repeated, the starting point for concerted engagement with key ideas: “the death of God”; the advent of European nihilism (“the history of the next two centuries”); the eternal return; will to power; and the revaluation of all values. To orientate oneself in relation to Nietzsche as a thinker of nihilism, typical next steps might include engagement with Heidegger’s monumental lecture series or Deleuze’s radicalization of Nietzsche’s thought as Kantian critique in addition to a plethora of more recent works in continental philosophy. All of this is very well traversed territory, its pathways deeply etched, its landmarks instantly recognized.

Less well-known, less frequently quoted, are the lines that intersperse Nietzsche’s grandiloquent claims to posterity in the final chapter of his final book, “Why I am a Destiny” in *Ecce Homo: How one becomes what one is* (1888). As he builds to the conclusion of the work, Nietzsche reiterates that “God” and the “true world” were invented as counter-concepts to life. Depreciating the only world that exists, they leave no goal or aim to earthly reality. He then proceeds to make the additional claim:

> The concepts ‘soul,’ ‘spirit,’ ultimately even the ‘immortal soul,’ were invented in order to despise the body, in order to make it sick and ‘holy,’ in order to cultivate an attitude of appalling levity towards all things in life which deserve to be treated seriously: questions of nutrition and habitation, of intellectual diet, the treatment of the sick, cleanliness, and weather! (EH, “Destiny,” 8)

In these final moments of *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche returns to matters which seem to have tangential relevance to his philosophical destiny and the advent of nihilism: questions of nourishment, hygiene, living space, meteorological conditions. Such commonplace concerns are alluded to at several points in Nietzsche’s quasi-autobiographical text, in part to

acknowledge the very mundane factors which "make" one what one is, and in part to argue that these "little things" are deprived of purpose, of "reason and task" owing to the otherworldly orientation of metaphysical thinking and its concomitant "contempt" for the body (EH, "Destiny", 8). Juxtaposed with the "world-historic" tenor of the vows to explode everything that has hitherto been sanctified, these references to such everyday matters might be dismissed as merely rhetorical, or, at best, as a materialist riposte to the much maligned "idealism,"[ii] a "view from below," as it were. Yet, after the devaluation of the highest values there can be no mere elevation of the "physical" or the "sensuous" to the former position of truth. In Platonic philosophy and its Judaeo-Christian successors, value is exclusively afforded to the "true" world, the "higher" realm of unchanging ideas, in contrast to this "apparent" world of becoming, change and passing away. To oppose this glorification of the ideal by appealing to the superiority of "matter" or the "body" would be to repeat the oppositional logic of negation which is nihilistic as such.[iii] And in any case, as Nietzsche phrases it so succinctly at the close of "How the True world finally became a Myth," "*with the true world, we have also abolished the apparent world!"* (*TI*, "True World"). Broad daylight but no horizon. If Nietzsche is the most prescient of philosophers it is because he detects the ineluctable pull of the abyss.

How, then, are we to interpret Nietzsche's appeal to "little things" such as diet, climate, and recreation in the context of nihilism: matters which are deemed trivial and "indifferent" according to "conventional opinion" (*EH*, "Clever," 10)? Acknowledging that such preoccupations seem unworthy of a philosopher destined to fulfil "great tasks" (*EH*, "Clever," 10), Nietzsche asserts in *Ecce Homo* that these things are "inconceivably more important than all that which has hitherto been held in high esteem. It is precisely in this quarter that we must begin *to learn afresh*" (*EH*, "Clever," 10). Arguably, in the twenty-first

century, something akin to this relearning is underway. In the last two decades, philosophy has embraced a range of orientations towards objects, things, and material life,[iv] leading the literary critic, Laura Marcus to name "embodiment, affect, the quotidian, singularity, contingency, intimacy, precarity" as "keywords of our time".[v] By contrast, in a world transformed by global capitalism Nietzsche's invective against Judaeo-Christian values may now seem antiquated. However, in what follows it will be argued that in order to appreciate how Nietzsche's thinking of the "nearest things" offers a new orientation both against and within nihilism, this encounter with such values remains surprisingly relevant. Accordingly, this essay will begin by briefly outlining Nietzsche's diagnosis of nihilism as a crisis of "orientation," going on to situate the nearest things in the context of his elaboration of physiology as a new guiding thread for thought. It will then turn to new materialist writing, particularly its recent engagement with Nietzsche's philosophy, in order to pursue the deeper implications of his "revaluation of values". Finally, it will consider how a revaluation of the nearest things avoids an uncritical appeal to the authority of lived experience and how this rich seam of Nietzsche's philosophy enables us to understand thought's affinity with more subtle becomings.

1. Nihilism and the Nearest Things

Nietzsche is unshakeable in his conviction that nihilism is rooted in one particular interpretation, "the Christian-moral one" (*WP* 1). The chief advantage of the Christian moral hypothesis was that it granted the human being "an absolute value," anchoring a self-reflective subject in a mirror-universe of the anthropic ideal. Christianity died "at the hands

of its own morality," from its own sense of "truthfulness" (*WP* 1). In the laboratory of Christian culture, the forces "cultivated" by morality include veracity. As Nietzsche explains, needs for "untruth" "implanted" by centuries of moral interpretation grow self-critical, resulting in a fatal antagonism: "*not* to value what we know, and yet not to be *allowed* any longer to value the lies we should like to tell ourselves" (*WP* 5). Lacking any sanction after the "death of God," the moral interpretation inexorably unravels, resulting in the autoimmune response of "dissolution" (*WP* 5). As Nietzsche pithily asserts: "The meaning of nihilism is that "*the highest values devalue themselves*" (*WP* 2).

This is a familiar story. Cultures lose their ability to make new fictions. Their dreams are too wakeful, they fail to deceive. The collapse of the categories by means of which humans make sense of existence leads from a corrosive scepticism to a debilitating aimlessness. Incapable of believing in the values that it has inherited, the modern human being suffers a loss of direction and purpose: "I don't know where I am; I am everything that doesn't know where it is" (*A*, 1). This crisis of orientation is vividly depicted in *The Gay Science* in which a "madman" announces the murder of God to an already disinterested crowd in a "marketplace." This famous passage abounds with questions posed by the madman who has sensed a seismic shift in the order of things:

> "Where has God gone?" he cried. "I will tell you. We have killed him — you and I. We are all his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving now? Where are we moving now? Away from all suns? Aren't we perpetually falling? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Aren't we straying as through an infinite nothing? (*GS* 125)

The madman's words come "too early" for the mocking and apathetic mob, already numbed by the false idol of commerce (*GS* 125). Only slowly will it dawn that the plunge into abyssal depths reflects not only a loss of the highest values, but of all coordination.

As Daniel Conway remarks, whilst all values are subject to historical devaluation, only the devaluation of the highest values is at issue in the "meaning" of nihilism.[vi] He makes the point that "*Oberst* [highest] connotes not only a cardinal sense of authority, but a spatial one as well – as if our "highest" values were also those most distant from us".[vii] Traditionally, philosophy has concerned itself with the most "distant" things – immortality, the reality of truth and the being of God - neglecting to consider the "closest things, for example, eating, housing, clothing, social intercourse" (*WS*, 5). These latter ideas preoccupy Nietzsche in the "middle period" of his writings and are scattered throughout *Human all too Human* (1878), *Assorted Opinions and M*axims (1879), *The Wanderer and his Shadow* (1880), *Dawn* (1881) and *The Gay Science* (1882). Elaborating on this theme in *The Wanderer and his Shadow*, he deplores the way in which human understanding is "*wrongly directed* and *artificially diverted away* from these smallest and closest things" (*WS* 6). Priests, teachers and idealists of every kind are held accountable for training the human being to look to matters such as the salvation of the soul, the service of the state, advancement of science or accumulation of capital. As a result, "most people see the *closest things of all* very badly and rarely pay them any attention" (*WS* 6). This is significant because Nietzsche claims that "*almost all the physical and psychical frailties* of the individual" stem from the failure to attend to the "nearest things" (*WS* 6).

To give new attention to the "near" may be construed as a corrective to all variants of other-worldly contemplation, a simple appeal to "concrete" reality or the authority of lived experience. In this vein Adrian del Caro remarks: "The common sense with which the closest things are affirmed speaks for itself. What is real is what is close, verifiable, and an individual should be able to make her own determinations on the degree of closeness of all things."[viii] However, there is no hint in Nietzsche's remarks that the nearest things are

naturally "given" and simply discoverable empirically. In fact, the "common sense" assumption that these are merely issues of personal proclivity has the unfortunate consequence of ensuring that the closest things are never "made the object of constant impartial and *general* reflection and reform" (*WS*, 5). Needless to say, these things are no longer the *same* things once the relation to transcendent ideas has been subtracted. We do not get a better look at the valley by removing the mountains. Other commentators perceive the influence of nineteenth century materialism on Nietzsche's philosophy, summed up in Feuerbach's famous remark that "man is what he eats".[ix] Here again, Nietzsche is unambiguous in his condemnation of the prevailing ideology of the natural: "For instance, we say 'we only eat to live'—an abominable *lie*, like that which speaks of the procreation of children as the real purpose of all sexual pleasure" (*WS* 5). Whether it is a question of how one divides the day, with whom we enjoy social intercourse, leisure, sleeping or eating,[x] the human animal is in despicable dependence and bondage to the nihilistic wisdom of "doctors, teachers and curers of souls" (*WS* 5), "the body" a false witness to its own most intimate encounters.

As Nietzsche's examples reveal, so long as the body is understood in terms of biological finality it will be relegated to a mere mechanism for achieving survival functions. All the nearest things are subject to this impoverishment because "*nihilistic* values, values of decline, have taken control under the aegis of the holiest names" (*A*, 6). If the closest things are considered at all, it is only in relation to the *preservation* of the human animal and not its excesses of desire, its ardent longings or libidinal expenditure. It is part of our nihilistic heritage that we have been disciplined to despise "the present and neighbourhood and life" (*WS* 16). Even the fortunate few who have dwelt in the brighter fields of nature and spirit have "inherited in their blood some of this poison of contempt for the nearest things" (*WS*

16). For this reason, the human being has at best only a deceptive "consciousness" of "everything nearest [*Allernächste*] – his own body for example" (*KSA* 1, 760). Consciousness is inherently misleading because it is believed to constitute "the unity of the organism" rather than only the latest and least development of the organic (*GS* 11); as a result, it perpetually misreads the evidence of the body. In fact, Nietzsche suggests that the conscious ego is only a tool in the service of a greater intelligence and that by far the greater number of bodily motions have nothing whatsoever to do with consciousness (*WP* 676). Accordingly, he counsels that the practice of taking the perspective of consciousness as the measure of things is a habit to be "unlearned":

> We learn to *think less of* all that is conscious: we unlearn the habit of making ourselves responsible for ourselves, because, as conscious beings fixing purposes, we are but the smallest part of ourselves. Of the numerous influences operating at every moment, e.g. air, electricity, we sense almost nothing: there could well be forces that, although we never sense them, continually influence us. (*WP* 676)

Nietzsche maintained that he was sensitive to minute fluctuations in atmospheric pressure, particularly electricity in the drifting clouds and that this accounted for much of his affliction (*KSB* 6: 95). Indeed, his voluminous correspondence provides copious examples of his obsession with weather, even to the point of reproducing meteorological tables detailing sun, rain and degrees of cloud cover in five major Italian cities one January (*KSB* 8: 335-336). This is just one of many examples of "little things" that are part of wider systems outwith human awareness. To take seriously these little things is not necessarily to become more "conscious" of them, especially given the proneness of consciousness to "degenerate" interpretation of the body (*WP* 674). In fact, *unlearning* the habits of consciousness means to question the demands of knowledge, including the very concept of "thingness" itself, which Nietzsche insists is merely an invention required by logic (*WP* 558). Claiming that "the

evidence of the body" reveals a "tremendous multiplicity" (*WP* 518), Nietzsche proposes to take the body (*der Leib*) instead as a new "guiding thread" for thought (*WP* 518). In speaking of *der Leib* in this way, he marks a distinction between the "living body" and *der Körper*: the body as a mechanical/functional entity. To embrace the living body as a new orientation for philosophy is to abandon the assumption that "thinking" originates within a discrete, self-reflective individual or transcendental subject. Open to the immensity of history, the living body is both the preeminent thought of philosophy and the locus of its thinking.

> The human body, in which the whole of the farthest and nearest past of all organic becoming reawakens and becomes bodily, through which and beyond which an enormous, inaudible stream seems to flow: the living body is a more astounding thought than the old "soul". (*WP* 659)

The body is the name for the "materialization" of the most distant and most proximate becoming, the ebb and flow of the stream of life. Of the life that streams through this living body, only the smallest part attains consciousness. Indeed, Nietzsche speculates that every living creature "is constantly thinking but does not know it" (*GS* 354). Fluid rather than cartographic, this astonishing body is immune to the illusion of a clear boundary between thought and its primary materiality. It is from here – where we always already were – that we are to "learn anew" about the "closest things" although the revaluation of values required for this "return to the same place" dissolves the concepts of sameness and subjectivity by which any of this could be recognised.

2. New Materialism

When Nietzsche wrote in 1888 about the inestimable importance of the nearest things he conceded that such matters as food, climate, environment and recreation were deemed trivial according to conventional opinion of the day. In our time of impending

ecological catastrophe, of a highly vulnerable global food system, and rapid re-engineering of human bodies through the insidious creep of biotechnologies, it has never been so urgent to engage with the fine detail of the everyday. New materialism is a term describing a cross-disciplinary endeavour to unsettle long entrenched assumptions about human imbrication in the material world.[xi] Despite its varied and nuanced inscriptions, at its most basic it "demands detailed analyses of our daily interactions with material objects and the natural environment"[xii] whilst remaining alert to "the enormous macroscopic impact of myriad mundane individual actions".[xiii] New materialism also aims "to problematize the anthropocentric and constructivist orientations of most twentieth-century theory in a way that encourages closer attention to the sciences by the humanities".[xiv] Notably, the language of new materialism invites a revaluation for thinking as recent developments "call upon us to reorient ourselves profoundly in relation to the world, to one another, and to ourselves".[xv] In short, the challenge is to think about a world/universe in which things do not exist "for us".

As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost observe in their introduction to *New Materialisms* (2010), there is an apparent paradox in thinking about matter: "as soon as we do so, we seem to distance ourselves from it, and within the space that opens up, a host of immaterial things seems to emerge: language, consciousness, subjectivity, agency, mind, soul; also imagination, emotions, values, meaning, and so on".[xvi] They go on to note that these have "typically been presented as idealities fundamentally different from matter and valorized as superior to the baser desires of biological matter or the inertia of physical stuff".[xvii] It is these idealist assumptions "and the values that flow from them," that materialism has traditionally contested.[xviii] Buoyed by the conviction that "to depart from the prioritization of the subject breaks through anthropocentrism,"[xix] new materialist theory

typically exhibits "antipathy towards oppositional ways of thinking."[xx] A further characteristic of the new materialists is "their insistence on describing active processes of materialization of which embodied humans are an integral part".[xxi] Forces, energies and intensities rather than substances have become the new currency.[xxii]

The parallels between this new orientation for thinking and Nietzsche's conception of the "guiding thread of the body" are marked. In a gesture which emphasises the continuity between the body and the world, new materialist philosophies tend to posit a "multiply tiered ontology" in which there is "no definitive break between sentient and nonsentient entities or between material and spiritual phenomena".[xxiii] For example, Diana Coole reconfigures agency as a complex of "agentic capacities" distributed across a spectrum of processes. The latter range from the pre-personal and non-conscious to the interpersonal and transpersonal.[xxiv] As Ali Beheler has recently commented, "Coole's image of a spectrum of agentic capacities provides a fecund frame for Nietzsche's disparate accounts of agency and the emergence of subjectivity".[xxv] Indeed, in discussing how "life forces" achieve embodied, agentic form Coole cites Nietzsche as a key thinker.[xxvi] Agentic capacities are processes or qualities involved in actions which do not presuppose self-consciousness as a point of origin and are "only contingently, not ontologically, identified with rational, individual *agents*".[xxvii] In multiple places in his writings, Nietzsche describes how such non-cognitive, pre-personal bodily processes help to structure perception and somatic orientation, despite the prevalent belief that actions are "caused" by human willing.

Despite this kinship, there has been relatively little new materialist involvement to date with Nietzsche's philosophy, although the work of Gilles Deleuze has lent a Nietzschean inflection to the evolving field. Two notable exceptions are Jane Bennett and Melissa A.

Orlie - both contributors to Coole and Frost's *New Materialisms*. In her Deleuzian-inspired *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), Jane Bennett argues that the "habit" of dividing the world in to dull matter and vibrant life contributes to neglect of "the vitality *of* matter and the lively powers *of* material formations".[xxviii] Ascribing agency to inorganic phenomena such as food, refuse and the electricity grid, Bennett seeks to focus attention on the active powers of non-subjects. Her working hypothesis is that the figure of an intrinsically inanimate matter is one of the impediments to the emergence of more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption, her guiding question being to ask how political responses to public problems would change if the capacities of non-human things were taken seriously.

To this end, Bennett sees Nietzsche as a philosopher who "believed that food had the power to shape the dispositions of persons and nations".[xxix] She cites with approval Nietzsche's various ruminations on alcoholism, vegetarianism and stimulants of various kinds ("coffee spreads darkness"). Here, as elsewhere, the arguments she references attest to the interaction of multiple "actants" or agentic capacities. On her reading, Nietzsche "gestures towards the agency of the food-person-sound assemblage" in his discussion of anti-Semitism's hold on Bismark's Germany with beer, newspapers, politics and Wagnerian music cited as the salient diet.[xxx] Further, she notes that for Nietzsche foods "co-act" with "intensities often described as perception, belief and memory" and warns against imagining these latter as higher forms. Indeed, she quotes Nietzsche's assertion from *Ecce Homo* that matters such as nutrition, place and climate, are "inconceivably more important" than all things that everyone has regarded as important hitherto.[xxxi] Surprisingly, though, there is a caveat.

> But there is .. a sense in which Nietzsche imagined the assemblages of consumption as issuing in calculable rather than emergent outcomes, outcomes whose predictability increases as one's knowledge of the system becomes more detailed, up to the minute and comprehensive. Nietzsche tended to slip back in to a mechanistic model of physiology.[xxxii]

This criticism is not contextualised in Bennett's book although the probable target is Nietzsche's reading of Luigi Cornaro's *La vita sobria* (*The Temperate Life*) in the section "The Four Great Errors" in *Twilight of the Idols*. There, Nietzsche declares that the celebrated Italian "saw in his diet the cause of his long life: while the prerequisite of long life, an extraordinarily slow metabolism, a small consumption, was the cause of his meagre diet" (*TI*, "Errors," 1). According to Bennett, Nietzsche complains that Cornaro's regimen only enhances the vitality of certain bodies and that his diet "does not fit all".[xxxiii] This is a somewhat peculiar interpretation of the *Twilight of the Idols* passage since the case of Cornaro is used by Nietzsche to exemplify "the error of mistaking cause for consequence," an error that is "among the most long-standing and recent of humanity's habits: it is even sanctified by us and bears the name 'religion,' 'morality'" (*TI*, "Errors," 2). That Cornaro's diet would not suit all is not the point of the example. Rather, Nietzsche maintains that Cornaro was not free to eat a little or a lot. His diet was not a causal "agent" in this sense: his frugality was not an act of "free will".

Implicitly, Bennett shares Nietzsche's view that the concept of causality presupposes the containment of "matter" within an anthropocentric model of knowledge, structured according to regularities of subject and object, doers and deed. Why then, should she mistake Nietzsche's argument as a mechanistic one when she reads his remarks on Cornaro? The answer perhaps lies in her assumption that the role of the nearest things in Nietzsche's work is analogous to that of Cornaro: "Do this and that, stop this and that – then you will be happy! Or else .." (*TI*, "Errors," 2). This says Nietzsche, is the "most general

formula underlying every religion and morality" and is a deeply engrained habit of thought (*TI*, "Errors," 2). To construe Nietzsche's remarks about diet as prescriptive is to continue to perceive the nearest things on a model of the "farthest things". It is to perpetuate the nihilistic moral imperatives of the priest. Despite Nietzsche's eclectic musings on doughy German pastries and the optimum time to drink tea, to consider the nearest things is not to confirm what we think we already know.

Nietzsche's aim when discussing Cornaro's diet is to show how the subject "Cornaro" is produced by a particular physiology and that it is illusionary to assume that Cornaro is an agent who prescribes a "general formula" for happiness. The argument is rather that a well-constituted, "happy" person "carries over the order of which his physiology represents into his relations with people and things" (*TI*, "Errors," 2). Nietzsche says that this inversion is a first example of his "revaluation of values" (*TI*, "Errors," 2). All phenomena are produced by physiologies within which certain value judgments have been incorporated and have become instinctive. It is for this reason that that they are so resistant to change. For good measure, it should be added here that Nietzsche underlines the point that "*habituation* to a certain causal interpretation" obstructs and even prohibits investigation of causation (*TI*, "Errors," 4), a point which Bennett's reading appears to bear out.

Despite a superficial resemblance, then, Jane Bennett's writings on edible matter do not illuminate Nietzsche's nearest things as a new orientation for thought. In fact, insofar as her recourse to Nietzsche is part of a broader ethical project to "reorient our own experience of eating" through recognition of the "agency of food" it attributes political power to a fairly familiar deliberative origin and humanist agenda: if "an image of inert matter helps animate our current practice of aggressively wasteful and planet endangering

consumption, then a materiality experienced as a lively force with agentic capacity could animate a more ecologically sustainable public".[xxxiv] It must be emphasised here that other new materialist writers have also identified this weakness. For example, similarly sceptical about the wider potential of Bennett's project to effect change, Diana Coole has declared that any individual ethical stance must be inflected with a greater awareness of systemic constraint since most of the objects that we encounter in a twenty-first century context have been commodified and are bound up in complex, competitive markets:

> In other words, without a better understanding and critique of the circuits through which matter flows – that is, an empirical, scientific and political investigation – it is difficult to appreciate the damage and challenges current forms of production and consumption involve or to think realistically about ways materially to transform them.[xxxv]

It will not escape the notice of a Nietzschean reader that the values informing Coole's commentary raise issues of their own about "power". For example, one might wish to subject the authority of "empirical, scientific and political values" to genealogical critique in relation to the "investigation". Equally, questions might be posed about the conception of matter as something which "flows through circuits," as if receiving its impress from forces extraneous to it. To speak of the "conduits and networks through which matter passes as it is transformed, given surplus value, degraded, rerouted, hoarded and so on,"[xxxvi] is to persist with the idea that "value" is something to be determined from "without". Thus formulated, matter continues to be seen in idealist terms as quiescent, lawful and fundamentally different in kind to creative God-like beings who, somehow immune to flows of dissolution, infuse it with meaning.

A similar tendency is discernible in Melissa A. Orlie's reading of Nietzsche's "impersonal materialism," in her contribution to Coole and Frost's *New Materialisms*

volume.[xxxvii] Orlie notes that once we acknowledge that "we are formed by material conditions not of our making" it is a struggle "to explain how our values and views are not simply determined by forces outside our control".[xxxviii] Identifying the will to power with impersonal "competing drives and passions," she suggests that for Nietzsche our freedom and creativity are exercised when we recognise our "spiritual fate" as "the accidental, meaningless, raw material out of which we can make virtues and values".[xxxix] As we have just noted in relation to Diana Coole's work, there is an implicit assumption in this kind of statement that "pure" matter is an object or resource for consciousness and that values are the exclusive property of human agents.

Yet there is a further point to be made here about the precise nature of these values. Elaborating upon Nietzsche's claim that "by far the greatest part of the mind's activity proceeds unconscious and unfelt" (*GS* 333) Orlie suggests that self-understanding begins when we learn to "do justice" to drives in "our warring depths".[xl] In her interpretation this means granting that "our drives and instincts .. all require their due".[xli] She maintains that "each instinct has some rightful claim to be experienced in awareness"[xlii] and that "obscure impulses which are not given their due and incorporated into conscious awareness" will seek to "undermine other instincts and diminish the energy" of that which we conventionally call our self.[xliii] Not only does this presume that the ultimate fate of unconscious drives is to be delivered over to consciousness ("the smallest part of ourselves"), it is also taken for granted that democratic ideals of justice will prevail over unruly matter that threatens to disobey. For example, Orlie asserts that cultivating enhanced receptivity to our experiences is required since it is "only by opening the self in this way that we might hope to achieve some just and orderly behaviour of the drives in

relation to one another".[xliv] How "we" could "do right" by all the drives in this way is never explained but the more pressing question is why we should aim to do so:

> The trouble with the narrowing of our experience is that it blocks energy for evaluation and action and thereby restricts our capacity to judge and act. And sustaining the capacity for judgement and action in the face of nihilism is the main problem Nietzsche sees confronting us.[xlv]

Orlie's argument is highly germane to our present discussion because it acknowledges that impediments to action or change are often unconscious. The irony here is that the capacity to act "in the face of nihilism" is programmed by values that are themselves part of our nihilistic inheritance: the ideology of propriety, individualism and the refusal of the impersonal.

In this connection, it is worth mentioning that the idiom of "giving things their due" is also to be found in the work of Jane Bennett[xlvi] and Diana Coole.[xlvii] To "give something its due" is to recognise rights, particularly in the context of payment for what is owed: to give "credit" or recompense. There is an economic model of contractual relationship underpinning this expression which reflects the prevailing ideology of the market. This is scarcely fortuitous given the genealogy of the modern subject as one who will be held accountable for debt as outlined in the Second Essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*. That human beings should take responsibility for reckless plundering of the natural world is not in dispute here. Rather, the point is that the unconscious values underpinning our thinking have a physiological legacy. According to Nietzsche, painful mnemotechnics are involved in the evolution of the human subject as an animal bred to remember promises. Corporeal memory develops in the bodies of debtors as a result of a history of creditors inflicting tortures upon their flesh as recompense for failure to yield the repayment that was due (*GM* 4-5).[xlviii] "Guilt" as a moral value thus has a non-moral origin in the dark history of the living

body. A further genealogical question suggests itself: To what extent is the idea of giving matter "its due" embedded in a vocabulary symptomatic of depleted physiological conditions? In other words, is this thinking still "indebted" to Platonic-Christian values?

The force of Nietzsche's appeal to the "near" is to show that thought is not independent of the material conditions which give it shape. The suspicious Nietzschean ear discerns Platonic-Christian values at work in Orlie's view that it is both possible and desirable for consciousness to marshal "just and orderly behaviour" of the drives as if "we" philosophers were missionaries venturing into the Dark Lands of the body to redeem the poor benighted drives, those cave-dwellers of physiology. In this regard it might be added that there was never any crisis or collision of values between globalising, proselytising Christianity and globalising proselytising capitalislm. Both operate with the values of slave-morality: the nihilistic values of decline. Both deal in the illusion of "rational and freely choosing subjects" who are responsible for their debts, both figure desires as needs or lack and subordinate the good to utility, efficiency and function.

Nietzsche's contention that our most inveterate habits of thought, sensation, and evaluation have been bred into the flesh and bone and nerves of "the human" for more than twenty centuries means that any attempt at a revaluation of values cannot be achieved by mere resolve. If philosophy has been corrupted by "theologian blood" (*A*, 10) and if inherited contempt for the little things courses through our veins (*WS* 16), it is not enough to move beyond anthropocentric forms of thinking to counter our nihilist inheritance. With respect to cultural change, Nietzsche insists that a "mere disciplining of feelings and thoughts" counts for almost nothing: "one first has to convince the body" (*TI*, "Expeditions," 47). And so, we return to the "smallest things".

3. Revaluation

With the horizon of meaning washed away and no more stars to sail by, it is not odd that the human should seek refuge in the Platonic-Christian values in which for so long it has been islanded. After all, on Nietzsche's account, the human animal has been formed as a "reactive" subject, bred to resist that which threatens its preservation. The new materialist vocabulary of thought represents an invigorating alternative to the nihilistic architecture of hierarchical, "two world" metaphysics but the examples we have discussed remain beholden to this inheritance at the level of value. Despite the clear affinity between new materialist theories and Nietzsche's thinking of the "near," some proponents of the former continue to presuppose that values are discrete items of human judgment: terms to be applied to a sensuous, physical world essentially different in "kind". Insofar as this preserves the anthropic ideal of the rational, judging agent it remains bound up with nihilism. The crushing sense of futility that is the bane of our times is fuelled by a misplaced faith in the otherness of matter and the "given," the resulting inertia a consummate example of the confusion of consequence with cause.

A new orientation to "our" world, to life, is achieved by recognising values as constitutive of phenomena and not ancillary to them. The separability of "values" from their material conditions is a theological prejudice: the principle that "the things of the highest value must have another origin *of their own*" (*BGE* 2). According to Nietzsche, nihilism is reached at the point when all one has left are "values that pass judgment" (*WP* 37): "detached and idealistic values, instead of dominating and guiding action, turn against action and condemn it" (*WP* 37). The "nearest things" are a persistent, perhaps,

embarrassing reminder of our community with base matter. Indeed, everything that suppresses and denies this continuity is intrinsically valorised, hence the excessive privileging of consciousness, thought and language.

Never simply nor solely the originator of values, the human is a channel "through" which values are articulated. In a provocative formulation, Nietzsche suggests that "When we speak of values we speak under the inspiration of life, from the perspective of life; life itself evaluates through us when we establish values" (*TI*, "Morality" 5). From this it follows that even a counter concept to life such as "God" is only a value judgement on the part of life, in this case, "declining, debilitated, weary, condemned life" (*TI*, "Morality" 5). To the extent that Nietzsche thinks of life in "physiological" terms, it is the formative interplay of material forces that "produce" value insofar as they give rise to phenomena. Indeed, this is how "nature" becomes "naturalised": formed and enforced according to dominant orientations. In this sense his philosophy is a fundamental revaluation of values, with the logic of Platonism being seen as one aspect of life, rather than the overarching structure within which life is situated.

As we have seen, in order to situate Nietzsche's appeal to the "little things" in *Ecce Homo* a rethinking of the body is required. This is not simply to emphasize the primacy of formative forces ("becoming") but to appreciate the primacy of value in terms of conditions for life. In an intriguing note, Nietzsche writes: "The point-of-view of "value" is the point-of-view constituting the preservation-enhancement conditions with respect to complex forms of relative duration of life within becoming" (*WP* 715). The essence of this dense idea is elaborated more fully in *Beyond Good and Evil* in which Nietzsche declares that ""Behind all logic .. and its apparent autonomy there stand evaluations, in plainer terms, physiological

demands for the preservation of a certain species of life" (*BGE*, 3). Nietzsche critically interrogates phenomena that turn against life but he sees them as wholly immanent to life and in some senses as necessary. This is significant because it means that our ability to "incorporate" [*einverleiben*] new values – to "in-body" them - is shaped by our history, by what we have become.

Accordingly, the vital task of revaluation is to wrest free from our nihilist "European" endowment: to triumph over "the sum of the imperious value judgments that have become part of our flesh and blood" (*GS* 380). Such labour is at the edge of the thinkable because it compels a vital transformation in relation to one's "own" physiology: one must "overcome" the times in oneself.[xlix] Nietzsche writes in *The Antichrist*: "Let us not underestimate the fact that *we ourselves*, we free spirits, are already a "revaluation of all values", an *embodied* [*leibhafte*] declaration of war on and victory over all old concepts of "true" and "untrue" (*A*, 13). No metaphor is intended here. Nietzsche's claim is that in order to wage war against nihilism, the matter of thought must change. Our habits of thought are part of this "matter," perhaps the "nearest".

As we have already noted, for Nietzsche the human body is that in which "the whole of the farthest and nearest past of all organic becoming reawakens and becomes bodily" (*WP* 659). The accumulated habits that materialize as living history are holding patterns that structure experience but the sediment also shifts and stirs within "an immense inaudible stream" (*WP* 659). The nearest things are the constant and immanent stabilizing forces that Nietzsche explicitly identifies as the "the root [*Wurzel*] of habits" (*KSA*, 9, 11 [167], p.506)[l], the material conditions that form the limits of the seemingly "given".[li] In a note from 1881[lii], which counsels beginning with "the smallest of the nearest things," Nietzsche reflects on the

"the whole dependence in which one is born and raised," including "the familiar rhythms" of our thinking and feeling, of our "intellectual needs and means of nutrition" (*KSA* 9: 13[20]). To this embodied normativity he proposes "*Experimentation* with change, first breaking with familiar things, (e.g. diet)" in order to test oneself against antagonist forces: to try and live and "travel" in these flows (*KSA* 9: 13[20], p.621-622).

Nietzsche's appeal to the nearest things provides rich resources to reorient engagements with nihilism because it redirects critical attention to the constant – and thus constantly overlooked – rhythms of thought and life. What is most proximate, closer than air, is habitualization to a style of thinking. Fundamental to nihilism, to both loss of "ground" and to any countermovement, is the "unlearning" of deeply rooted habits. Nietzsche acknowledges that "there are moments when we cannot subdue that absurd impulse that is called 'idealism'" (*WP* 16), not least because our "feelings about value judgments" may well express conditions of preservation and growth that belong to times long gone by (WP 110). This is why the imperative is to examine and question, not to prescribe and decree.

This is also why turning to the nearest things is not to appeal to how things really "are". Nietzsche's identification of the living body as the basis of all rationality and value does not entail any ascension "above" that base. Experimenting with habits will have effects not just on our understanding but on our intimate, quotidian and affective experience. Beyond the lures of the distraction industries and the homogenizing tendencies of the markets, there are multiple counter currents at play: "We have to learn to *think differently* – in order at last, perhaps very late on, to attain even more: to *feel differently*" (*D*, 103). In this sense, when Nietzsche advocates paying attention to the seemingly insignificant details of

life, his call is to *unlived* experience – to the streams that exceed what we can order and contain, and which "very late on" we may come to feel.

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[i] I have used the following editions of Nietzsche's texts (English translations slightly modified): "Schopenhauer as Educator" in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); *Human, All Too Human*, vol. 1 and vol. 2 (including *The Wanderer and His Shadow*), trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986; *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974); *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973; *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, trans. Douglas Smith, (Oxford University Press, 1996); *The Anti-Christ*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One is*, trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2007); *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, (Vintage: New York, 1968); *Friedrich Nietzsche*: *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: dtv and Walter de Gruyter, 1967–77 and 1998); *Friedrich Nietzsche*: *Sämtliche Briefe. Kritische Studienausgabe*, 8 vols., ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: dtv and Walter de Gruyter, 1975–84);

[ii] Nietzsche writes to Malwida von Meysenbug on October 20, 1888, "*Every sentence* of my writings contains a *contempt* for idealism" (*KSB* 8, 458).

[iii] For this reason, Heidegger declares that Nietzsche regards nihilism "as the "inner logic" of Western history" ("The Word of Nietzsche 'God is Dead'" (1952) in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (1977) translated by William Lovitt, (New York: Harper and Row, 53-112), 67.

[iv] A vast literature on "objects" and "things" has dominated approaches to material culture in recent years. Suffice it to say that in a range of different theoretical positions such as "thing theory," "vibrant materialism" and "object orientated ontology" the accent falls on displacing the human as the focal point for thinking.

[v] Laura Marcus, "Autobiographical returns," *Textual Practice*, Vol 30, no. 7, 2016, 1160-1161, 1161.

[vi] Daniel Conway, "Revisiting the will to power: Active nihilism and the project of transhuman philosophy" in Keith Ansell Pearson, and Diane Morgan (eds), *Nihilism now! Monsters of Energy*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, 117-141), 122.

[vii] Conway, 'Revisiting,' 121.

[viii] Adrian del Caro, *Grounding the Nietzsche Rhetoric of the Earth*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 216.

[ix] Julian Young, *Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 282.

[x] Nietzsche lists a range of modes of living in *WS* 5 and 6. See also the list he supplies under the heading "Doctrine of the Nearest Things" in the *Nachlass*: "*Division* of the day [..], food, company, nature, solitude, sleep, employment, education (original and foreign), use of mood and atmospheric conditions, retreat from politics. (*KSA* 8: 40 [16], p.581)

[xi] Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, Samantha (eds) *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010), 6: "As critically engaged theorists, we find ourselves compelled to explore the significance of complex issues such as climate change or global capital and population flows, the biotechnological engineering of genetically modified organisms, or the saturation of our intimate and physical lives by digital, wireless, and virtual technologies. From our understanding of the boundary between life and death and our everyday work practices to the way we feed ourselves and recreate

or procreate, we are finding our environment materially and conceptually reconstituted in ways that pose profound and unprecedented normative questions".

[xii] Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*, p.4.

[xiii] Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*, 16.

[xiv] Christopher N. Gamble, Joshua S. Hanan, Thomas Nail, "What is New Materialism?" *Angelaki: Journal of theoretical humanities*, Vol. 24, Issue 6, 2019. 111-134, 111.

[xv] Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*, 6.

[xvi] Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*, 1-2.

[xvii] Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*, 2.

[xviii] Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*, 2.

[xix] Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin. *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*. Michigan: Open Humanities Press, 2012) 162.

[xx] Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*, 8.

[xxi] Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*, 8.

[xxii] Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*, 13.

[xxiii] Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*, 1.

[xxiv] Diana Coole, "Rethinking agency: A phenomenological approach to embodiment and agentic capacities," *Political Studies*, Vol. 53, 2005, 124-142, 128: "In proposing a spectrum of [..] qualities I am suggesting breaking down the notion of agency into a series of contingent phenomena in order to describe their provisional emergence, as well as to reflect upon the agentic propensities of a variety of processes at different levels of (co-)existence. At one pole I envisage pre-personal, non-cognitive bodily processes; at the other, transpersonal, intersubjective processes that instantiate an interworld. Between them are singularities: phenomena with a relatively individual or collective identity whose provisional forms and activities come closer to modernity's sense of agency without coinciding with it."

[xxv] Ali Beheler, "The Body as a Guiding Thread: New Materialist Conceptions of Agentic Corporeality and Nietzsche's Emergent Subject," *Philosophy Today*, vol. 65, Issue 1, Winter, 2021, 69-88, 71.

[xxvi] Coole, "Rethinking", 132.

[xxvii] Coole, "Rethinking", 125.

[xxviii] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010), vii. She comments: "By 'vitality' I mean the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities or tendencies of their own" (viii). Her examples of "vibrant matter" include "the way that omega-3 fatty acids can alter human moods" and the generation of "lively streams of chemicals and volatile winds of methane" from refuse landfill sites (vii).

[xxix] Bennett, *Vibrant*, 43.

[xxx] Bennett, *Vibrant*, 45.

[xxxi] Bennett, *Vibrant*, 45.

[xxxii] Bennett, *Vibrant*, 45.

[xxxiii] Bennett, *Vibrant*, 44.

[xxxiv] Bennett, *Vibrant*, 51.

[xxxv] Diana Coole, "Agentic capacities and capacious historical materialism: Thinking with new materialisms in the political sciences," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 41, Issue 3, 2013, 451-469, 463. Similarly Thomas Lemke in "An alternative model of politics?: Prospects and problems with Jane Bennett's vital materialism," *Theory, Culture, Society*, vol. 35, no. 6, 2018, 31-54, 47, has maintained that Bennett's "affirmation of the 'vitality of things' is counterproductive as it tend to obscure processes of power".

[xxxvi] Coole, "Agentic Capacities" 456.

[xxxvii] Melissa A. Orlie, "Impersonal Matter" in Coole, Diana & Frost, Samantha (eds) (2010) *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 116-136.

[xxxviii] Orlie, "Impersonal," 117.

[xxxix] Orlie, "Impersonal," 125.

[xl] Orlie, "Impersonal," 127-8.

[xli] Orlie, "Impersonal," 128.

[xlii] Orlie, "Impersonal," 129.

[xliii] Orlie, "Impersonal," 128-129.

[xliv] Orlie, "Impersonal," 130.

[xlv] Orlie, "Impersonal," 129.

[xlvi] In her Preface to *Vibrant Matter* (viii) Jane Bennett declares that she wants "to see how analyses of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due".

[xlvii] Diana Coole speaks of giving "materiality its due" in "Agentic Capacities" (454); Coole and Frost use the phrase on several occasions in their introduction to *New Materialisms* (7, 20, 27).

[xlviii] It is important to note that Diana Coole references Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* when discussing the historical emergence of subjectivity although she does not discuss the relation of values to this process (Coole, "Rethinking," 132).

[xlix] Nietzsche develops this thought in section 380 of *The Gay Science* entitled ""The wanderer" speaks". This section recalls the wanderer who engages in a dialogue with his shadow in *The Wanderer and his Shadow*. At the close of the latter text the shadow commends the wanderer for having vowed to "become again a good neighbour to the things closest" to him.

[l] There are fascinating links between this idea of the nearest things as the root of habits and Nietzsche's eternal return.

[li] See also *KSA* 9: 11[212], p.525: "All habitualization (e.g. to a specific food, like coffee, or a specific division of time) leads in the end to the *breeding of a specific kind of human*. So look at yourself! Examine the smallest of things! Where is it leading? Does it belong to *your* kind, to *your* purpose?"

[lii] See also the similar note *KSA* 9: 11[258] p.539.

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